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[untitled]

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Panel: Writer Rules: Share What You Go By

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You are a writer. You are a writer of narrative non-fiction. You can't help it, you tried to do something else, like make it as a professional boxer or a propagandist for the Communist Party, but your fate – as everyone's must be – is determined by a force outside yourself. So here you are, beyond redemption, a writer who employs the devices of fiction to portray the so-called Truth.

The year is 1975. You find yourself in Luanda, in the Hotel Tivoli, mere months after an event known fetchingly as the Carnation Revolution has happened in a country far, far away. The event affects you directly, because it has spelt the end of the regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, and with it the end of Portugal's colonies, of which Angola is one.

Your only choice, given your vocation, given your life's calling, is to sit in your hotel room and watch.

You watch the white people of Luanda pack their belongings in boxes. Then you watch them pack their boxes in crates. Then you watch the crates pile up at the harbour until you can barely make out the freighters on the horizon that have come to take it all away. And when the boxes and the crates and the people have gone, you are still there. Watching.

In late 1975, alone in your hotel, the battle for Luanda already a fading memory, you write a paragraph that goes like this:

"When the army left, the dogs began to go hungry and slim down. For a while they drifted around the city in a desultory mob, looking for a handout. One day they disappeared. I think they followed the human example and left Luanda, since I never came across a dead dog afterwards, though hundreds of them had been loitering in front of the general headquarters and frolicking in front of the palace. One could suppose that an energetic leader emerged to take the dogs out of the city. If the dogs went north, they ran into the FNLA. If they went south, they ran into Unita. On the other hand, if they went east, in the direction of Ndalatando and Saurimo, they might have made it into Zambia, then to Mozambique or even Tanzania."

Your name, of course, is Ryszard Kapuscinski. The modern classic you will publish in 1976 will be called *Another Day of Life*.

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If there's a metaphor that speaks more hauntingly of the mood in the Angolan capital in those first post-Salazar months, I've yet to read it. Kapuscinski had explained already that these dogs came from the most expensive breeds – "boxers, bulldogs, greyhounds, Dobermans, dachshunds, Airedales, spaniels..." – and that they weren't welcome on the Lisbon-bound ships with their fleeing colonial masters. The image of them leaving the city one day in a great hungry pack, running into the FNLA or Unita, is (for me, at least) unforgettable, the very reason Michael Ignatieff once said of Kapuscinski that he "raised reportage to the standard of literature."

Problem is, if you're the sort of reader who can only digest your non-fiction when it's drowning in verifiable facts, if non-fiction for you is nothing without the footnote and the index, you're going to have a tough time with the quoted extract. For starters, who ever heard of a city so godforsaken that even the dogs upped and left "one" day? Or of spoiled, can-fed purebreds that could make it – even hypothetically – from Africa's west coast, through predator and disease-infested bush, to countries on the opposite side of the continent?

This long-debated divergence in Kapuscinski's work between "facts" and the "Truth," between items of data and the inherent feel of a subject, is easily the most important argument

in the genre. As far as creative non-fiction is concerned, with an emphasis on the modifier “creative,” this is what we talk about when we talk about Writer Rules.

We talk about things like composite characters. Joseph Mitchell, one of the fathers of the form, used them throughout his life. His most famous character, the New York bum-savant Joe Gould, may not have been an amalgamation of different individuals that Mitchell met on his wanderings through the city, but many others in his beautiful renderings were – and we know that these composites were presented as living human beings, as fact, by his grateful editors at the New Yorker magazine.

We talk about the doctoring of quotes, which is self-explanatory.

And on the far end of the scale, we talk about making stuff up, which is, simply, fiction.

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Where do I stand on the matter? I stand on the side of research and reporting; if the quotidian reality of a story makes for boring copy, find another story. I was devastated when I discovered that Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* was chock-full of embellishments, and although for years the book shone in my mind as the ultimate paradigm of the craft, it now sits well below a text like Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* – a stunning, literary, and one hundred percent factual account of the African-American Great Migration, and the winner of last year’s Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction.

A.J. Liebling and H.L. Mencken also fall into the category inhabited by Kapuscinski, Mitchell and Capote; five men, all giants of narrative journalism, who took liberties with the truth. In the face of these masters, my Puritanism is feeble. It’s not as simple as all that, of course; I do agree with Lawrence Weschler, who said, “it is impossible to go out there as if you’re gonna laminate the world, as if you’re gonna take a Xerox machine and put it up to the face of reality” – meaning, everything is selection, is ordering, is re-presenting.

But there is a line; I’m standing behind it with Calvin Trillin. “In general, I don’t subscribe to the theory that you can kind of improve on the facts,” the author of 26 authentically non-fiction books once said. “Otherwise, I’d do it.”
